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### The value of sloppy craft

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## The value of 'Sloppy craft': creativity and community.

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'Craft is a starting place, a set of possibilities. It avoids absolutes, certainties, over-robust definitions, solace. It offers places, interstices, where objects and people meet. It is unstable, contingent. It is about experience. It is about desire. It can be beautiful.' Edmund de Waal

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/w/what-is-craft/> Accessed 10.10.11

De Waal's observation of Craft as an unstable set of possibilities or experiences provides a starting point for this discussion of urban-based creativity and community. The description does not work well as a definition, because it does not provide a clear, picture, giving instead a somewhat sloppy outline of the possibilities brought about by craft. The beauty of the words, however, lies in their ability to sum up the potential of craft, especially suggesting the synergies to be found through active participation in creativity. Glenn Adamson echoes De Waal's point in an article on 'sloppy craft' for *Crafts Magazine* when he comments that 'knitting and homespun craft activities are restless phenomena' [Adamson, 2011, p40] because they can be viewed from a range of perspectives: from formal and conceptual, to political and social. This chapter will focus on some of the synergies produced when craft is used as a 'restless' connector to foster a sense of place.

Nineteenth century critics, designers and architects such as John Ruskin, William Morris and William Richard Lethaby were well aware that craft had an important function in society and were strong advocates of craft as a crucial determinant in reducing the growing sense of alienation and passive consumption evident in British society by the mid-1800s. For example Lethaby noted the importance of seeing art (for

Lethaby the term 'art' served as a representative of making and production) as an active and participatory activity with far-reaching effects on individuals and community:

Art is many things—service, record, and stimulus [...] Writers on aesthetics have not sufficiently recognised that Art is service before it is delight; it is labour as well as emotion; it is substance as well as expression. What they say here and there is true enough, but it is a way that leads to destruction; it is concerned with appearances rather than conduct.  
[Lethaby, 1918, 156-157]

More recent academic work shows that there is a renewed interest in the psychological and social phenomena associated with craft. The social anthropologist Tim Ingold, for example has much to say about creativity, agency and materiality. In an essay on materiality he states his intention is 'to shift the focus on to processes of formation rather than on final products, and to flows and transformations of materials as against states of matter.' (Ingold, 2008, p3). Psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work on 'flow' centres on happiness and creativity and emphasises the value of activities which completely absorb an individual and temporarily remove them from the pressures of everyday life. Craft clearly conforms to this description.

To overcome the anxieties and depressions of contemporary life, individuals must become independent of the social environment to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments. To achieve such autonomy, a person has to learn to provide rewards to herself. She has to develop the ability to find enjoyment and purpose regardless of external circumstances."  
(Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p16)

The sociologist David Gauntlett's text *Making is Connecting* has also provoked a greater academic focus on the importance of community and creativity. Moreover his approach is in keeping with that of Ruskin and Morris as he argues that because creativity is socially relevant it has a political aspect too. For Gauntlett it is of little

matter whether the artefacts created are 'silly' or essential, the important point is that time and effort has been put into the making itself:

You may note that my examples just above are not the absolute essentials of life – people can survive without silly entertainment, flowers, gloves, or songs, if they have to. But it is the fact that people have made a choice – to make something themselves rather than just consume what's given by the big suppliers – that is significant. Amplified slightly, it leads to a whole new way of looking at things, and potentially to a real political shift in how we deal with the world [Gauntlett, 2011, p19]

The connections between craft, creativity and community can generate strong emotional ties, with the landscape itself or with our individual histories, often producing a merging of the private and public. Ingold points this out when he argues that:

A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there – to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these in turn depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage. [Ingold, 1993, 155]

These approaches have undoubtedly renewed awareness of and interest in the value of 'making' within communities, of being engaged in a project from start to finish and sharing it with others. Such new perspectives have been paralleled by a rising interest in DIY, community craft projects and craft blogs as well as a flourishing of the 'indie craft' movement. This shift of emphasis and arguments, for thinking about creativity as a generative and iterative process, also presents an opportunity for evaluating 'sloppy craft' in relation to creativity and community. Finding a way to connect people to each other and to the area within which they reside is as essential now as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Craft, then is not just about the wealthy few

commissioning, or purchasing exquisite status pieces; it can be a power tool for the disenfranchised too.

In the light of the rise of academic and popular interest in craft, community and creativity, this essay intends to explore some of the socio-political possibilities arising from the shifting of focus from a perfect end-product to an emphasis on process. It will argue that craft as a shared phenomenon has an important role in encouraging creativity, particularly for those who would not necessarily consider themselves 'artistic', or profess to have any interest in making or producing work, goods, or produce of their own. The discussion will chiefly focus on two community projects in Glasgow, Scotland. Both projects cultivate craft practice as a social endeavour and highlight the relevance of craft as a political tool. They use craft's ability to foster an investment of time and energy; to encourage other ways of looking at the world; and to develop an individual's relationship to a locale.

These examples are selected from a range of Glasgow-based projects and events which fall into de Waal's criteria of 'places and interstices, where objects and people meet'. The first draws upon a historic building, Maryhill Burgh Halls, and demonstrates 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century civic aspirations associated with the use of craft. Maryhill Burgh Halls in the north west of the city has recently been renovated with a strong emphasis on engaging local inhabitants from the design and planning phase through to the execution of work. The second example focuses on community work in a group of multi-storey buildings known as Red Road, an area in the north of Glasgow. A

programme to demolish all of these buildings by 2017 is in progress but part of the estate is currently home to refugees, asylum seekers and first-time home occupants who have previously been living in hostels or on the streets.

### **Glasgow context**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Glasgow witnessed a period of rapid growth and industrialisation with the city becoming renowned for its shipbuilding, engineering and metal works. This rapid industrialisation was equalled by a surge in population which, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> had reached over a million, but as the number of residents increased, so living conditions deteriorated drastically and poor housing became a serious issue. Glasgow was not alone in experiencing such phenomena. The Sociologist and Town Planner Patrick Geddes noted of Scotland in general that, “no population in the world is now so predominantly urban, and, as sanitary reformers know, none so ill-housed at that” [Geddes, 1915]. However, despite Glasgow’s many social problems it was known for its unrivalled feats of engineering, and many of the citizens were keen to establish the City as contemporary and forward-thinking. The Art Historian Juliet Kinchin has argued that this attachment to technological progress and industrial skills was:

Expressed metaphorically in the aggressively modern, sleek and stylised forms of much Glasgow Style furniture. Certain detailing evoked the formal language of engineering, and pleasure in the manipulation of metal upon which Glasgow's industrial wealth was founded.” [Kinchin, 2006]

Whilst the ‘Glasgow Style’ of the late 19th century made reference to nature and landscape Kinchen argues that an awareness of, and pride in, the city informed the creativity associated with this style as its forms were filtered through an urban

sensibility, expressing a psychological identification with the city and its industrial, urban culture.

### **Maryhill Burgh Halls**

This case study of Maryhill Burgh Halls provides an account of craft and creativity being used to rejuvenate a building and the area associated with it. It is a story of community/craft being an integral part of a regeneration process to build a stronger network of belonging and of encouraging participants to develop a strong sense of ownership and local character.

Maryhill Burgh Halls were designed by Duncan McNaughton in 1876. Situated in the north west of Glasgow they opened in 1878, contained a public hall large enough to hold 1000 people, a court room and sufficient accommodation to provide for an increased level of policing for the area as apart of an attempt to reduce some of the anti-social behaviour associated with the rapidly rising population. The Halls were used for local events and functions until the 1980s, then over the following decade the Halls fell into disrepair and were eventually closed. In 2004 the Maryhill Burgh Halls Trust (a collaborative community initiative involving local residents, Cube Housing Association, Maryhill Housing Association and Glasgow City Council) was set up with the aim of redeveloping and refurbishing the buildings to be an integral element in the planned housing and leisure developments for the surrounding area, and once again to function as an important focal point for community activity.

Twenty stained-glass panels provided one of the most striking decorative elements in the original public hall. Created by the Glaswegian stained-glass studio Adam and Small, and designed by Stephen Adams, each window depicted a local trade or industry including images of Calico Workers at Kelvindale Mills on the River Kelvin, a glassblower representing two large glass works in nearby streets, iron moulders, linen bleachers and papermakers. The realism of the portrayal of the industries and trades in the Maryhill Burgh Halls' windows is in marked contrast to Adam's other stained glass treatments of similar subjects where workmen are portrayed in classical, late-Medieval or Renaissance clothing and static poses. Many of the landscapes incorporated into the designs are similarly realist portraying the nearby canal or distant steeples.

The windows were removed from the Halls in the 1990s to protect them from vandalism and were stored in the Glasgow Museums collection. As part of the refurbishment it was agreed that ten of the originals should be reinstated into the hall and that ten new panels should be commissioned. Stained-glass designer Alec Galloway and community artist Margo Winning were commissioned to create the new designs. At this point in the commissioning process the local community was invited to suggest contemporary trades as subjects for the designs, and workshops were run to engage the Maryhill residents with the 19<sup>th</sup> century crafts used in the building and subsequent repair of the Halls.

The brief for the new series of windows was that the designs should continue the themes of trades and industries of Maryhill, whilst depicting an up-to-date picture of



contemporary business, life and leisure in the area, and the Trust was convinced that the success of the project lay in the hands of the local community in order to ensure that the new windows become as much a legacy of the Halls as the original 19<sup>th</sup> century glass. The project *Windows of Today* was launched, with a vision of creating 'some new stained glass windows to record what is important in the area today, and to give the restoration project a lasting legacy.' [Maryhill Burgh Halls Trust, 2011, p4] A call to invite people to contribute ideas, memories and stories; participate in glass-making workshops; and attend artist's talks and visits was at the centre of this aim to enable the local community to have an insight into the process of making as well as designing.

**Figure 1 Maryhill Burgh Hall *Windows of Today* Workshop B&W**

A variety of individuals and groups responded including primary school children, local businesses and residents, assisting the artists to discover and explore local civic history. Winning commented on the enthusiasm of the community input:

It quickly emerged that the multiple layers of communities that make up Maryhill were very keen to express their thoughts and ideas in a range of ways; including writing, drawings, glass making and in endless interesting discussion and chat. It provided an enormously valuable introduction and connection to the area and community, letting me learn more about the place and people in a few weeks than I otherwise could have in years. It has been a delightful project to be involved in.

[<http://www.maryhillburghhalls.org.uk/glass/> Accessed 5.9.2012]

The themes for the ten new windows were eventually agreed to be: Education; Culture; Social Heritage; Heavy Trades; Workers; Space Age; Youth; Sport and Leisure; Regeneration; and Diversity. Although these titles are generic, the designs themselves

incorporate well-known artists and sportspeople who were born in the area, local companies who provide components for satellites as well as long established families associated with local shops and cafes.

Gordon Barr, Heritage Development Officer for the Trust commented on the importance of the community's interest in the project:

We're really excited to finally see the results of all the hours of workshops and talks, and the effort put into this, [...] from the literally hundreds of local people who got involved in various ways to have their say, try out some of the techniques involved in making stained glass, and in some cases, have their images actually featured in the glass itself.

[<http://www.maryhillburghhalls.org.uk/glass/> Accessed 5.9.2012]

The windows are now complete, but the long-term success of this project will depend very much on this early involvement of the local community, who will recall and recount their contribution. The hope is that the new windows will become as much a part of the permanent legacy of the Burgh Halls as the original glass from 1878.

It was not just the stained glass that provided opportunities for locals to be involved with the crafts relating to the building. Joinery and stone masonry workshops for adults and school children were run, alongside pointing and roofing sessions providing opportunities to learn about traditional crafts, the intricacies of the building and most important to participate in the rebuilding process. The connections made by participating in this process facilitating unconscious connections with the place and the location.

## **Figure 2 Maryhill Burgh Hall School Children Workshop B&W**

Over recent years, architectural and urban planners have often revived, reinterpreted and recreated historical events, folklore and myths relating to an area in order to redefine the sense of what the place was and is and provide an added dimension to peoples' appreciation of a location. However, this attempt often misses the mark because it is added on rather than integral to the development. As Geddes rightly noted:

'Local character' is thus no mere accidental old-world quaintness, as its mimics think and say. It is attained only in course of adequate grasp and treatment of the whole environment, and in active sympathy with the essential and characteristic life of the place concerned. [Geddes, 1915, 397]

The workshops and events organised at Maryhill Burgh Hall together represent an involvement at the 'craft face' of the building and were an essential element in inspiring the many constituencies in Maryhill to be involved with the Hall in order to encourage a strong sense of the new building being very much a part of the community itself and not an added component.

### **Red Road**

This second case study focuses on multi-storey apartment blocks in an area to the north of Glasgow known as Red Road and it provides an opportunity to reflect on the role of craft in sustaining a sense of community during a programme of demolition and relocation. The numerous art and craft projects produced for Red Road have been designed to empower the inhabitants of the apartments as they faced the uncertainty of

losing their current homes.

Designed in 1962 by Sam Bunton and Associates for the Glasgow Corporation and erected between 1964 and 1969, the Red Road flats comprised a cluster of eight high-rise buildings some of which contained as many as thirty-one storeys. Given the combination of Glasgow's interest in design, technology and engineering and the city's long-term social issues of overcrowding and poor housing it is unsurprising that the New York-inspired high-rise architecture appeared to provide an exciting solution to the city's problems of poor housing and overcrowding. Since the 1920s New York City's skyline functioned as a sign of modernity inspiring hopes for a utopian future and provided a blueprint for countless architects and planners across Britain. At the time of their completion, Red Road's skyscraper skyline formed the highest steel-framed social housing structures in Europe, and contained over 1,300 dwellings. Bunton was obviously aware of the severity of his design but he emphasised the Modernist tenets of form and function with the practical and rational taking precedent. 'Housing today isn't domestic architecture – it's a public building. You mustn't expect airs and graces and things like different-sized windows and ornamental features.' [Bunton quoted by Glendinning, 1997, p107]

Without doubt the Red Road buildings can be seen as the result of Bunton's own interests in efficiency, function and experimentation as well as municipal and public desire to deal with social problems of overcrowded and unhealthy tenements. They should, however, also be understood as part of Glasgow's pride in its industrial and

technological achievements and identity as a forward-looking, contemporary city.

### **Figure 3 View of Red Road B&W**

Although visually distinctive and functional, by the 1970s the social and political climate had changed and there was generally less enthusiasm for such large-scale modernist architectural solutions. More importantly it became apparent that:

Such peripheral housing schemes were thus a kind of parody of the traditional tenement life of Glasgow: they consisted of tenements indeed but they were far removed from the urban context in which that mode of life had developed, and incapable of generating their own community life. In spite of the literature of planning, already vast, and containing so many hard earned lessons, these new units were not only devoid of facilities themselves, but were miles from the traditional centre of Glasgow life. [Crawford, Beck, Hanlon, 2007, p51]

Red Road's occupants began to report problems of vandalism and the flats quickly fell into a poor state. In the 1980s some of the flats were transferred for use by the YMCA and also as student accommodation and when, between 1999 and 2001 the city of Glasgow became home to 18000 people seeking asylum, Red Road became one of the key areas for relocation. Community projects grew in parallel with this development offering opportunities for integration and support. Red Road's future is now that of rehousing, relocation and demolition: in July 2012 the first demolition took place and the remaining blocks will be demolished on a rolling programme up until 2017. Despite its impoverished and declining state some occupants remain firmly committed to living in the flats. In an attempt to deal with the occupants' future of uncertainty and upheaval as plans for the demolition unfolded, Glasgow Housing Authority (GHA) has funded and implemented many art projects to attempt to support the individuals and families who were long-term residents as well as those newly arrived seeking asylum in

the UK. A number of craft-based and visual art groups became involved with the residents in order to help settle new people in to their short-term environment.

*Fab Pad* was created in 1998 by community arts group Impact Arts in order to support vulnerable young people in their first tenancy. GHA allowed Impact Arts to develop four community flats in the Red Road complex to demonstrate the possibilities for personalising the home through making simple home textiles and furnishings on a very limited budget. Participants received travel expenses and a budget of £100 to spend on their home and were able to attend local weekly workshops with professional interior designers to develop their ideas, plan, design and create their space. Activities included personal design consultation, shopping and inspiration trips, whilst also having the opportunity to meet other young people in the same situation as themselves. The project also contributed towards better chances of being employed by encouraging those on the scheme to take positive steps to secure training and education. The intention was that by providing basic craft skills such as sewing to turn unwanted textiles into cushions, wall hanging or covers, a sense of pride in achievement, a deeper attachment to the place, and a sense of home might start to develop. Programme manager Alison Sommerville said:

Some people have had a difficult time or a difficult background, and some have been in care or lost their job. All they want is to make their place nice and homely. ... This project makes people realise that they can achieve a lot on a limited budget. They see the end product and that they have a nice house and their self-esteem goes up. Then they can think of the next step; getting a job or going back to college. [<http://programmes.stv.tv/the-hour/homes-gardens/home-improvements/228821-fab-pad-decorate-your-home-on-a-budget/> Accessed 10.10.11]

Multi-story was another community-based agency at the core of the Red Road creative programme. It provided: 'opportunities for people to take part in creative activity alongside makers and artists and aim[ed] to support dialogues across communities' [<http://www.multi-story.org/> - Accessed 3.5.10] Their projects drew upon traditional and contemporary practices to explore issues of concern amongst the residents from relocation and regeneration to new communities. Many of Multi-story's projects were concerned with photography, film and animation but some activities were craft-based. *Mothers of Purl* is a good example; here women from the site came together to learn to knit, improve their skills, share stories or just to knit and to enjoy each other's company. The women who gathered together were drawn from across the community with long-term Scottish residents, asylum seekers and refugees from many countries participating. As I discovered whilst participating in a *Mothers of Purl* workshop, one of the interesting outcomes of their sharing of stories, skills and experience is that knitting techniques and patterns indigenous to a specific country have been shared with and taught to others with the result that new and innovative stitches have been created, morphed and subsequently passed on. This synthesis of knowledge and skill being shared over a cup of tea in Glasgow in many ways embodies the sharing of knowledge without concern for ontological or geographic boundaries that is becoming an important theme in the professional world of art and craft practice.

*Precious metal: 16 Days of Action* at the Red Road Centre was a project run in 2010 by North Glasgow Integration Network and Community Studio artists Iseult Timmermans and Ruth Hollywood and it provided an opportunity for a group of women from the Red Road area to explore the theme of peace through jewellery making. Over four afternoon workshops the women learnt some basic jewellery-making skills in order to create unique 'personal narrative' jewellery that reflected their responses to the global campaign *16 Days of Action to Eliminate Violence Against Women*. The work produced in the sessions was fed into a community-wide event: once the work was complete photographs of the group modelling some of their hand made jewellery were taken, printed and shown at the Red Road Community Studio alongside photographic posters made by The Red Road Family Centre Photography Group, and new creative writing and poetry readings.

By introducing the women to a basic making process they were provided with an opportunity to reflect on this international theme and comment at a local level on what for some of them was a deeply personal topic rather than an abstract issue. Using inexpensive materials the pieces included necklaces incorporating toy weapons and emblems of love and peace. Mastering a skill and creating an expensive commodity was not the goal, the most important element was that the outcome was experienced as part of a communal creativity, and as such it provided an opportunity for self-reflection which ultimately functioned as an 'interstice' - that small place where the various



objects and people could meet. As Ruskin comments in *The Seven Lamps of*

*Architecture*:

‘It is not the material, but the absence of the human labour which makes the thing worthless; and a piece of terra cotta, or of plaster of Paris, which has been wrought by the human hand, is worth all the stone in Carrara, but by machinery’. [Ruskin, 1865, p45]

The craft processes that have been learnt as a result of the many and diverse projects held at Red Road over recent years similarly embody an approach where value lies not in the end product but within the potential for the freedom of thought and the creativity which lies beneath the surface of the artefact no matter how ugly (or sloppy) one might consider that artefact to be. Ruskin again:

Examine once more those ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues, anatomiless and rigid; but do not mock at them for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone, a freedom of thought. [Ruskin, 1892, 198-9].

## **Discussion**

‘Knitting introduces people to team work, they have gained enthusiasm and confidence, and then they started knitting flowers to make a statement. Through this process we are hoping to achieve something that personally benefits them and contributes on a broader platform to racial attitudes. They are starting to knit random objects now and drop them around the estate with a simple message ‘Found me?’ and the website for the project. Through that we are hoping to encourage more people to get involved.’ *Mothers of Purl* Project Coordinator, Iseult Timmermans

As noted in the introduction, a strong sense of alienation has played an important role in urban and industrial culture and provides another thread for this examination of creativity and community and the value of sloppy craft in that context.

The artist Sabrina Gswandtner argues in an essay, 'The Politics of Craft,' that: 'alienation is one of the things drawing people to craft as a hobby [...] And part of the pleasure of the knitting or sewing circle is that it doesn't happen in isolation.' [*Modern Painters*, February 2008, p83] As city dwellers continue to attempt to address the homogenised and mass-produced phenomenon of the contemporary city, craft as a communal experience functions as a form of resistance to that sense of alienation. Sociologist Frank Furedi, argues that today's world is 'characterised by the loss of the web of meaning through which people make sense about who they are and where they stand in relation to others.' [Furedi, p162] In both the case studies presented here it is clear to see that the involvement of contemporary collaborative craft practices, domestic (albeit performed in a public context), amateur and professional, has facilitated social interaction. The resulting objects from such projects may be sloppy and not of professional perfection but rather than providing a superficial sense of belonging the participatory experiences discussed here demonstrate the potential for the creation of far more complex webs of meaning (social, psychological, political and cultural): providing a depth of connection achieved through the sharing of process and experience.

Red Road and Maryhill Burgh Halls projects are examples of a more structured approach to involving the community in a local project, so that they too feel a part of the history, culture and on-going life of the area, and craft as process has played an important role in reinforcing social connections. Both projects demonstrate how the learning of craft skills, even if very basic, can encourage more positive responses to city

living, by finding alternative solutions to mass produced creativity and combatting the sense of alienation so frequently experienced in post-industrial cities. Creativity, agency and material are at the heart of the projects demonstrating the social connections to be made through engaging with, and sharing, creative craft processes. Their main thrust has been to find ways of involving people and helping them feel that they belong despite being in impoverished or undifferentiated areas of a city.

As noted in the introduction, Gauntlett in *Making is Connecting* (2011) has analysed the role of connectivity in contemporary lives. He points out that through making things and sharing we become more engaged in the world and embedded in our surroundings. Gauntlett suggests that although when questioned most people would say that more money would make them happier, sociological research finds that contributing to the world, rather than simply consuming it promotes a greater sense of happiness, or pleasure and achievement.

The Psychological Research Unit at the University of Central Lancaster undertook a study [L Froggett, R Little, A Roy, I Whitaker, 2011] which questioned the efficacy of socially engaged arts and the changes such projects can bring about in individuals and communities. (Their research included the Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow as one of its main case studies because of its commitment to open source programming and their outreach projects which include sales of home-made craft work in the foyer of the gallery and gardening projects in the East End of the city). The team's research highlighted that psychological barriers are most likely to preclude individuals from

participating in a project because of a belief that engaging in an art or craft practice is 'not for people like us.' Despite such reticence, the researchers argue that the chief value of socially engaged art:

lies in the way artists try to provide such experiences through the opportunities they offer for taking part, and the way in which the work they commission and produce enables the discovery of new forms for feelings which connect selves and communities. When aesthetic form is found to contain otherwise inchoate or inexpressible feeling, it can become a 'force' that 'moves' individuals or becomes a driver of social change. [L Froggett, R Little, A Roy, I Whitaker, 2011 p91.]

The philosopher Elizabeth Grosz reiterates this in an essay on 'The thing':

Things are our way of dealing with a world in which we are enmeshed rather than over which we have dominion. [...] We make objects in order to live in the world. Or, in another, Nietzschean sense, we must live in the world artistically, not as *homo sapiens* but as *homo faber*. [Grosz 2009 quoted by Attiwill, 2013, p1]

Engagement, rather than a perfect end-product is the key to promoting social capital and the result is that participants become knitted into the fabric of the community.

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